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SIPDIS

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DEPARTMENT FOR EAP/MLS BRETT BLACKSHAW

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SUBJECT: GVN PROMISES AND DETAINEE RELEASES IN WAKE OF LAND RIGHTS PROTESTS

REF: HCMC 766 AND PREVIOUS

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1. (SBU) Summary: Since land rights protests in Ho Chi Minh City were broken up by police on July 18, the GVN has continued publicizing the measures it is taking to address land rights protesters' concerns, including the establishment of fourteen interagency inspection teams to look into unresolved land claims disputes. Eyewitnesses have dismissed overseas reports that heavy police violence was used to break up protests and most of the protest organizers earlier reported detained have been released. ConGen has been unable to confirm the status of two others. End summary.

GVN CREATES MULTI-AGENCY TASK FORCE

2. (U) Press reports continue to reflect positive GVN actions in the aftermath of the forcible breakup of land rights protests in HCMC on July 18. According to local media reports, senior State Inspectorate official Tran Van Truyen announced the establishment of 14 inspection teams on July 26 to resolve outstanding claims in Vietnam's southern provinces. These inspection teams will include officials from the Ministries of Natural Resources and Environment, Finance, Construction, the State Inspectorate and the Office of Government(OOG - an Executive-level office which advises the Prime Minister and Cabinet members among others). Press reports also stated that some 'simple cases' of land disputes and compensation had been settled in the province of Dong Thap. According to one report, the Deputy Party Secretary of Tien Giang province, home to the largest number of protesters, personally met with protesters to listen to their claims and called for relevant agencies to proceed with the resolution.

3. (SBU) Despite this active press campaign, ConGen's contacts noted no concrete breakthroughs in this thorny issue. Mr. Nguyen Van Trinh (aka, Ba Trinh), a Tien Giang resident and one of the two main organizers of reftel protests, told ConGen that he has not heard of any successful settlements. Monk Thich Minh Nguyet of the outlawed Unified Buddhist Church of Vietnam (UBCV), who visited the protesters during their three-week demonstration in HCMC and maintains close contacts with the organizers (reftel), told us that Tien Giang authorities have made promises but that he has observed no actual progress to date.

DETAINEE UPDATE

4. (SBU) ConGen attempts to communicate with the protest organizers have been limited because their cell phones appear to have been blocked, but we did manage to speak with Nguyen Van Trinh. Despite several reports -- primarily from overseas

Vietnamese groups -- of police using water hoses, cattle prods, and tear gas to break up demonstrators, Trinh said he did not see any tear gas, and that water hoses were only used to clean the area where protesters had been camped for three weeks. Trinh did confirm that he was forcibly placed into a police truck and suffered minor injuries when he tried to resist, but said he was not beaten. Released after one night in police custody, Trinh said he has been summoned to return for interviews with the police almost everyday. Trinh told us that police have asked him for names of other organizers and information on how funds from the UBCV and overseas Vietnamese supporters were funneled to the protesters. Police have also tried to pressure Trinh into signing a commitment not to organize or take part in land protests in the future. Trinh said he does not yet know whether he will be prosecuted for his role in the protests.

15. (SBU) Pastor Duong Kim Khai, a ConGen contact with several connections within the land rights movement, confirmed that Ms. Nguyen Thi Bao Phuong, the PalTalk user arrested for allegedly giving food to the protesters and whose case was the focus of several inquiries from U.S. based NGO's, was released after a brief detention. Pastor Khai also confirmed that the other main organizer previously reported in reftel, Ms. Cao Que Hoa, has been released. ConGen has been unable to confirm the present status of two other protest organizers, Ms. Vu Thanh Phuong and Ms. Hien.

COMMENT

16. (SBU) Though the establishment of 14 interagency inspection teams shows a willingness to admit that the protestors had a valid grievance and perhaps even a GVN willingness to take action on the land protesters' claims, actual resolution of these complicated and difficult cases will likely take some time to materialize even if the GVN's press statements are completely sincere. The GVN's handling of the protest organizers has been restrained thus far, but ConGen will continue attempts to confirm detainee releases as well as report any future arrests

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or prosecutions of land protest organizers. End comment.

17. (U) This cable was coordinated with Embassy Hanoi.
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